

TRIANGULAR ABSURDITY IN HAROLD PINTER'S *THE CARETAKER*

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Abstract

The life in post-war period has been adverse due to the catalyst World War II for the infliction of human suffering. The period in the second half of the 20th century has been an awful stage copious in predicament and misery. Harold Pinter and other absurdist playwrights have investigated the circumstances in the post-war period in which every kind of suffering haunted the humans. Existential dilemma has been the main problem that kept the human movement twisting—for they have to earn to keep their being. Breakdown of communication and identity crisis has been the issue among the people of 20th century, and is aptly reflected in the play. The attitude of hegemony found among individuals is revealed mostly through the episodes of the play.

Keywords: Communication breakdown, Hegemony, Identity crisis, Post-war, Suffering, *The Caretaker*

The play *The Caretaker* depicts the human suffering and diverse predicament that haunted people in the mid-20th century after the World War II. It is about the undisciplined life that people used to live in the post-war period, with dilemma in every aspect—economical, social, political, cultural, natural, intellectual, spiritual, and moral etc. Through this play, Pinter has skilfully portrayed the unfavourable circumstances that crippled the human society in the modern period. His plays locate the “collective subject” by exploring the relationship between an individual discourse and a collective ideology—between an individual and the society (Woodroffe 499). Such characters have dragged their sense of being towards plight and utter absurdism. The Theatre of the Absurd describes that absurd characters are fearful of darkness, obscurity, loneliness and usually suffer from various phobia—hydrophobia, nyctophobia, claustrophobia, insomnia, and other similar apprehensions. In an interview with Tynan, Pinter states:

I think that in this play . . . I *have* developed, that I have no need to use cabaret turns and blackouts and screams in the dark. . . . I do see this play as merely . . . a particular human situation, concerning three particular people (qtd. in Gale 111).

Pinter says that he has written plays about violent families. All the characters in the play are puzzled and have their distinctive stories to present which make the audience desperately anxious about the characters. Generally, the behaviour of absurd characters shocked the audience as being strange and unpredictable. Kerr writes, Pinter is “the only man working in the theatre [. . .] who writes existentialist plays existentially” (qtd. in Fuegi 32). Pinter and other absurdist playwrights delineate the absurd societies where every class had its unique problem. The senior class of the society had to earn for a living due to lack of any adult member in their life. Pinter presents a difference between

unmarried and married people in the post-war period and declares that the former suffered less than the latter.

At the beginning of the play it is clearly described that the things in the room are put in an unsystematic and random way indicating the disorganised life and distorted dwelling of modern individuals. The play presents wretched Davies' dreadful life that bursts into anxiety, misery, terror, threat, and tension. Davies feels threatened at Aston's home; and experiences a lot of terror which haunts him all the time. He is an old man suffering from all kinds of problems but Aston makes him feel calm and relaxed. He expresses his suffering from the beginning of the play, and feels lonely miserable, "I left my wife. Fortnight after I married her, no, not so much as that, no more than a week" (*Caretaker* 9). Most of the people left homes due to their inability to feed other members in their families. They were in a bad condition; and extreme misery and poverty led them to abandon their newly-wedded brides shortly after marriage. Davies reminisces his good time but largely suffers in the present time.

Pinter exposed the sense of dominance in modern man who tried to exert power over members of the family and others in society. He reveals the superiority and inferiority complex in each and every class of post-war generation. Such attitude gives rise to quarrels and clashes in every aspect of life, and apparently makes life absurd. Mostly individuals strove to achieve the role of dominance: not only the labour class but the noble class equally as well. The people in the modern age were short tempered, jealous and easily irritable. After World War II, people lost respect and pity for elders and senior citizens who were merely treated as labours, servants and a burden on family and on society too. In Pinter's plays we come to know that senior citizens face and experience predicament at the hands of young generation. It is quite natural that old age is the age of weakness, pain, torment, and distress. This elderly section of the society is badly treated by the young generation. They live a life full of misery, anxiety, pain, tension and are haunted by many other ambiguities.

The period before World War II has been suitable and favourable for man to a large extent. The elderly and senior most class of the society were given proper respect and treated humbly. Davies reminisces the period when people used to love and respect elders and senior citizens, "I said, where I was brought up we had some idea how to talk to old people with the proper respect, we was brought up with right ideas" (*Caretaker* 10). People love to join their company to learn lessons and morale of life. Due to moral knowledge people were sanctimonious; had faith in religion and trust in each other. Such people were apparently normal. But as soon as World War II erupted, devastation took place. Pinter's depiction of the post-war life is unique, informative and significant. The elderly citizens were merely supposed to earn in the so-called modern world. The question strikes our mind as to how could a man of sixty (Davies) or above find any job somewhere? Pinter with other playwrights has echoed the post-war life where humans were troubled by idleness, unemployment; and they could not locate any job quite easily, but had to struggle to find one. In the post-war period, people found it harder to adjust smoothly to any position. Pinter reflects the modern life in which individuals feel comfort in silence. Such individuals have isolated themselves from the world and worldly objects to find relief from the business of world and prefer to be idle. People generally suffer anxiously because at times they cannot find themselves in certain good positions. This is one of the drastic effects of World War II that ushered in changes in every aspect of the life in terms of social, political, cultural, economical, financial, and natural etc.

Identity crisis is one of the major problems facing the people of the modern world. Pinter insists that individuals are deprived of their being and cannot identify or define their real status. Davies is deprived of his identity: his real name is Mac Davies but he has changed it and survives under an assumed name, "Bernard Jenkins". He declares, "I changed my name! Years ago. I been

going around under an assumed name!” (*Caretaker* 20). For Davies’ comfort and easy stay, Aston offers him many things. He has been offered the job as caretaker at a house, but he has to present his identity through references. So he waits for clear weather in order to go to Sidcup and to get the papers, that are evidence of his real identity, “They prove who I am! I can’t move without them papers. They tell you who I am. You see! I’m stuck without them” (*Caretaker* 20). It gets observed that man is deprived of personal character and social identity by the pressures of the society. He cannot find his real identity due to the drastic effect of World War II. Ionesco states:

I contemplate myself, see myself attacked by incomprehensible suffering, nameless regrets, objectless remorse, a sort of love, a sort of hate, by a semblance of joy, by a strange pity (for what, for whom?). I see myself torn by blind forces, rising from the depths of me, struggling among themselves in a desperate conflict without issue; I am identifying with one or another of these forces, and yet I realize fully that I can-not belong entirely to one or the other (what do they want of me?), for obviously I cannot know who I am, nor why I am (705-6).

Pinter’s plays depict the human condition before and after World War II. As mentioned above, identity crisis rendered humans anxious, as they lost their real status of life. Davies enlightens that before war he used to be a different man with power, strength and predominantly boasts of real identity—“Mac Davies”. But war made him to suffer and having grown old, he is weak, alone, miserable, full of pain and pathos, has nothing to eat or wear, has been asylum seeker, and more than the most, loses his real identity and the real count of time, “Oh, must be . . . it was in the war . . . must be . . . about near on fifteen years ago” (*Caretaker* 21). In the words of Bleich: “the figure of Davies presents the most complicated and most frustrating associations. There is no denying that I hate him intensely. I can feel nothing but disgust for people [like Davies] who have no ambition” (32).

Generally some individuals suffer certain phobia which can be due to any mishap in their life; even trivial things can cause a great threat to such individuals and make them to worry and increase their tension. The problem with Pinter’s absurd characters is the feeling of fear from insignificant things despite their acquaintance with it. They are scared of trifling things which really will not damage them, but yet they cannot get rid of such feelings. Davies is fed up with the disconnected gas stove, “You see, the trouble is, it’s on top of my bed, you see?” (*Caretaker* 26); and later complains to Mick, “it might blow up, it might do me harm!” (*Caretaker* 59). Disaster and destruction caused by the World War II caused phobia, put fear of ordinary and silly things in the human mind. Davies feels threatened when left alone in the room and performs a number of absurd activities in obscurity that exposes his terror; and makes the audience anxious too. Moreover, claustrophobic feelings are reflected in all characters’ behaviour, and Davies suffers the same:

Davies stands still. He waits a few seconds, then goes to the door, opens it, looks out, closes it, stands with his back to it, turns swiftly, opens it, looks out, comes back closes the door, finds the keys in his pocket, tries one, tries the other, locks the door. He looks about the room (*Caretaker* 27).

Pinter examined human behaviour and propounded that all activities performed by absurd characters are illogical and do not necessarily make any sense. Pinter’s plays represent the significance of modernist humanity that has lost its meaning in which people used to attack, beat, and tease each other, making the world a miserable place to live in. The play portrays the miserable human condition where quarrels, tiffs, duels over trivial things and issues took place. His characters suddenly erupt in duels and confuse the audience. Davies is attacked by his fellow worker in the caff (a cafe serving simple and basic food), and could not thrash him in defence due to his old age and ailing health.

Davies has been attacked by Mick at the very first interaction and gets dominated over right from the beginning. The nervousness is created among the audience by the horrible interaction between Mick and Davies in which Mick hastily interrogates, torments, examines, pressurises Davies without trying to know who the man is. Davies examines nearly everything in the room and all of a sudden Mick silently seizes his arm and swiftly forces him to the ground (*Caretaker* 28). Davies could do nothing in defence, but struggles, grimaces, whimpers, and stares at Mick. He almost feels dead and can only utter “Uuuuuuuhhh! Uuuuuuuhhh! What! What! What! Uuuuuuuhhh!” (*Caretaker* 28). He is silenced and converses in mere *pauses* that symbolise his terror which is one of the prime qualities of Pinter’s plays representing the absurd nature of his characters. Regarding pauses in the dialogues Dutton propounds: “The pause allows us time to reflect that we are on the borders of some very uncomfortable areas—insanity, menace, insecurity, homelessness” (105). Mick’s presence on stage represents inhuman activities and irreligious belief. The way he welcomes the guest in the room is unacceptable to the audience to a large extent. He is a hoodlum and a disciple of the devil (Bleich 32). The audience feels sympathy for Davies when Mick troubles him repeatedly. Mick takes his bag and torments him by throwing his trousers in his face. So at the end of Act I, the interaction between Davies and Mick takes place in complete silence in which Mick tortures and interrogates Davies physically and mentally without any logic. Mick curses him repeatedly, “you’re an old rogue. You’re nothing but an old scoundrel” (*Caretaker* 35). And further mentions, “You stink”. “You’re stinking the place out. You’re an old robber”. “You’re an old skate”. “You’re an old barbarian” (*Caretaker* 35) trespassing, loitering with intent, daylight robbery, filching, thieving and stinking the place out. In Pinter’s plays we see an enclosed womb-like universe of terror (Geller 703). Burkman explains:

[. . .] a poignant portrayal of man’s self-destructive nature, his seeing compulsion to live his life in the image of the cruel ritual [. . .], a battle for possession and self, a sense of self as victim or victor rather than as one self among many (qtd. in Hurt 285).

Failure of communication is apparently observed throughout the play. Aston and Mick do not have any fraternal chat to each other, so Mick uses Davies as a tool of communication to convey certain messages to Aston. He does not want Aston to live his life in idleness rather wishes him to enjoy life in some business or profession. Dohmen submits:

Pinter still sees reality as elusive, not necessarily on philosophical grounds, but because man would have it so. The quicksand is the product of human memory that has been softened and distorted by emotional needs and fears. Whether they blunder onto this treacherous surface in their blindness or burrow into it for security, Pinter’s recent characters have consistently lost all human contact, and often themselves as well, in this barren, shifting, lethal terrain (41).

Aston reminisces the days when he used to be healthy, strong, and smoothly lived his life. All of a sudden, he suffered from hallucinations and inappropriately treated rather tortured by doctors (*Caretaker* 55-57). The treatment given to him by doctors was the electric current which was approved by his mother’s signature. He was left a wretched figure with dormant soul, lost his thoughts, feelings, speaking power, could not walk properly and got frustrated. Pinter presented the human ailments in the post-war period. Those who suffer were not given suitable treatment but were tortured, led towards more sufferings, and thus rendered strangers even to themselves. In such flow, normal individuals spin into abnormal state of affairs.

Pinter has portrayed the society in which a man is given refuge and furnished with every possible comfort by some benefactors; but for the purpose of permanent dwelling he instigates his benefactors against each other. Davies acts as a chameleon and tries to form alliances with both

brothers by shifting roles from Aston to Mick and vice versa. "The irony is that his changeability and lack of selectivity ultimately cost him what he most desires" (Gale 109). Davies never wishes and expects his expulsion from the world of both brothers. Living under an illusion, Davies considers himself to be a member of the family and struggles to be dominant over both brothers throughout the play, so orders them on most of the occasions, "You haven't come across that pair of shoes you was going to look out for me, have you?" (*Caretaker* 54). He even complains, "I can't go out in this with these, can I?" (*Caretaker* 54). He demands more and more as his familiarity with the brothers grows rapidly, particularly with Aston due to the latter's sensible nature and kind-heartedness. Bleich mentions:

People want to be individuals, they do not want to be individuals, they do not want to be strange. They do not want any physical defects that others can laugh or stare at, and they do not want to do anything strange . . . (32-33).

Davies' entry has disturbed the whole peaceful environment in the house. Before his arrival Aston used to have a calm sleep. However, subsequently it got disrupted by Davies' irritating groans and noises in his sleep. Davies' arrival alienated the binary relationship between the two brothers. Desperate changes take place in the environment of the house and in the relationship between the two brothers. Davies plays a deceitful role to create conflict between two brothers to break their relationship which is already cold ever since he enters their province. This quality of absurd characters creating conflict between intimate relations is an outstanding trait of Pinter's depiction. Davies implements "divide and rule" policy to achieve the authority on both brothers to stay there permanently.

Davies tries to provoke Mick to act against Aston by mentioning that Aston does not let him enjoy calm sleep, instead wakes him up in the middle of the night, "He wakes me up! He wakes me up in the middle of the night!" (*Caretaker* 62). The problem lies within Davies, but he refuses to admit, and exclaims, "Tells me I'm making noises!" (*Caretaker* 62). Davies strives to create a rift between Aston and Mick. He does it because he has the feeling of provoking Mick against Aston. He forgets the benefaction, the support and the comfort that Aston provides him all the time. Mick knows his brother very well and Aston's negative image presented by Davies is unacceptable to him. So he lets Davies speak more till Aston learns about Davies' conspiracy. The distinctive feature of absurd characters is that they merely talk to each other and hardly build any communication between them when put in a room. Davies whinges that Aston does not talk to him when both are in a single room, "I mean, we don't have any conversation, you see? You can't live in the same room with someone who . . . who don't have any conversation with you" (*Caretaker* 60). The absurd characters are depressed about absurd thoughts and do not perceive someone's presence in the same room, and to chat with someone is inept for them.

Aston is a disturbed and puzzled character with a kind-heart and mercy for others, but he makes himself suffer. His sleep is disturbed by Davies' groans and noises since he (Davies) stays with him (Aston), "I . . . I didn't have a very good night again" (*Caretaker* 52). Aston suffers at his own hands by giving refuge to old tramp Davies who makes horrible noises and groans in his sleep. Davies' use of language at the beginning of the play bears out infantile model, as his smart talk dominates Aston through most part of the play (Bleich 39). Initially, Aston talks in a mild, slow and monosyllabic way, but his speech rapidly changes becoming louder and quicker. He begins to refuse Davies' demand who turns out to be his rival. Davies gets shocked when Aston shakes him while grunting in sleep; but he completely resists:

ASTON. Hey, stop it, will you? I can't sleep.

DAVIES. What? What? What's going on?

ASTON. You're making noises.

DAVIES. I'm an old man, what do you expect me to do, stop breathing? (*Caretaker* 66).

The natural thing is that old men usually groan in their sleep and it depicts their plight; it also expresses the tension, anxiety, ill treatment, selflessness, threat, and terror that people experience in their dreadful lives. Davies' groaning in his sleep is not deliberate but spontaneous due to the awful experience in his life at every spot. Aston is made to suffer by Davies due to his dreadful noises in the middle of the night that disturbs Aston's calm sleep. Both try to feel comfortable at individual levels, so are equally anxious to feel relaxed. Davies, however, dominates Aston in their encounter:

Giving me bad dreams, who's responsible, then, for me having bad dreams? If you wouldn't keep mucking me about I wouldn't make no noises? How do you expect me to sleep peaceful when you keep poking me all the time? What do you want me to do, stop breathing? (*Caretaker* 66).

Pinter has exposed the existential reality of the early second half of the 20th century. So it can be said that the circle of suffering cordoned the post-war humans completely. As mentioned earlier, one of the reasons for suffering during this period was the breakdown of communication. Communication facilitates the flow and exchange of ideas. It provides an outlet to portray feelings. It enables decision-making and analysis of issues. However, as it is evident in *The Caretaker*, the breakdown of communication leads to piling up of unsolved issues and adding to the anxiety of the characters. It poses existential questions and affects the identity of each of the characters.

The cycle of hegemony begins shortly after Davies is given refuge; continues through many dreadful events and prolongs until Aston realises his fault of excessive tolerance of Davies' disgusting attitude and resists accordingly, "I . . . I think it's about time you found somewhere else" (*Caretaker* 68). Aston could neither endure Davies' attitude any more nor his dominating way of communication. He expresses that Davies' stay at the home is over, but Davies consistently cautions and intimidates him, "Me? You talking to me? Not me, man! You!" (*Caretaker* 68). He further mentions that he stays there as caretaker appointed by Mick. Aston blames him for the disturbance of calm and peaceful environment at home ever since he put foot on it. The tranquil and cheerful life of both brothers is lost due to his entry, "You've been stinking the place out" (*Caretaker* 69). Aston forcefully encounters the stubborn old tramp and throws him out of the house. In Berkowitz's statement: "the play presents a picture of isolated individuals at loose ends, men who lack a sense of who they are, where they belong, and what their place is in the scheme of things" (110). In the words of Dohmen: "Here both the dependent and the self-sufficient share similar fates, lapsing finally into silences, resigning themselves to permanent isolation" (41). Davies abuses Aston's kindness and plays off two brothers against each other. The fraternal adhesive bond that has been broken down for time being gets reconciled, and eventually the old Davies is evicted.

The desire of all three characters is to build mutual relationships among them. Aston and Mick eventually get reconciled and expel Davies. While Mick leaves the stage for the last time after he defeats and despairs Davies, both brothers smile faintly at each other. Leech calls this smile as a token that represents things are restored as they should be and the fraternal relationship is revived, "They are brothers, and . . . they are together for a moment, in silence . . . as they smile . . . there is understanding and affection" (qtd. in Gale 110). Aston and Mick are seen in reconciliation mood with a smile and finally deny the very existence of Davies. In *Hiding Games: 'The Caretaker'*, "Pinter appreciated the question asked about the faint smile between two brothers in the final scene and answered 'I think it's a smile that they love each other'" (qtd. in Almansi and Henderson 57). So the conspiracy did not harm the brothers. Instead it ruined and marred the old tramp. In Arden's words,

The Caretaker is “a study of the unexpected strength of family ties against an intruder” (qtd. in Gale 110). Davies fails to exploit the situation any further and with the restoration of communication, familial ties are also restored.

The intelligible Beckettian world is found in Pinter’s theatre. The play portrays the post-war humans exploiting each other. They were busy in creating conflict in the society, home, between people, family members, friends, brothers, relatives etc. It leads to breakdown in most of the relationships. Camaraderie is lost between individuals who turn into strangers, and only in rare cases the relations got reconciled. Individuals strove a lot to get supremacy and eternal comfort by acting as conspirers against their patrons but unfortunately they did nothing except ruin themselves. Davies could not control his silly behaviour and attitude, and is rebuked by both Aston and Mick as soon as they re-established their fraternity at the end. Almansi and Henderson submit, “Despite the viciousness of Davies, the dullness of Aston and certain traits of motiveless malignity in Mick, *The Caretaker* is finally a play about love: brotherly love” (57).

Communication breakdown comes to the fore in the play mostly between the two brothers. Mick and Aston throughout the play are not seen having a single chat with each other. While Aston comes in to the room, Mick leaves, and when Mick enters, Aston exits. Dutton expresses, “Their entrances and exits, for example, add up to a smooth and sophisticated game of blind-man’s buff or pass-the-parcel-with Davies as the blind man or the parcel, never knowing which way he will be pushed next” (109). There is a mutual collusion and apathy between the two brothers in their dealing with Davies. Dutton announces “*The Caretaker* stands as an object lesson to modern times” (110). Failure of communication has been the major issue in the absurd plays, but when we look at *The Caretaker*, we also encounter relationship breakdown at most stages. Random dialogue and conversation is a quality of the absurd plays, particularly Pinter’s plays. The audience do not see any chat between intimate and fraternal relatives from the beginning to almost the point where the play comes to its conclusion.

Thus the play presents man’s struggle for life in modern world because he could not adjust easily to any situation, and has nothing in his hand to avoid idleness and unemployment which has been the major cause for human suffering. It also reveals that some victims were given refuge by certain benefactors, relieved their pain, helped and served them in every respect, but the darker side of their supporting affair was that they were not acknowledged by such victims at all, rather accused and turned against them. Through absurd plays, life is regarded meaningless and insignificant in general and is considered futile and incongruous in particular in Pinter’s plays. *The Caretaker* depicts the existential dilemma that rendered people troubled and anxious at most occasions of the life. It effectively shows breakdown of communication can cause rift and endanger life. It also shows chaos giving way to order once communication is restored.

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